

PREDICTED MBIRA FOUND

by

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This article is written as a follow-up to my article “The original African mbira?” (1972). I can report that an instrument which I predicted to have existed in that article actually did/does exist! In the original article I compared the tuning layouts of two related present-day members of the mbira family, *hera*, also called *matepe*, (found in northern Zimbabwe and northeast Zimbabwe into Mozambique) and *nyonganyonga* (found in central Mozambique, from Mutare, Zimbabwe to Beira, Mozambique and also into southern Malawi).

While doing a survey of mbira holdings in museums in South Africa in 1993, I discovered an example of an instrument whose tuning layout seemed to lie exactly between the two. It was ‘Museum No. ET 6981’ in the collection of the National Cultural History Museum in Pretoria (now called Ditsong Cultural History Museum). It had been donated by Mrs. C. Garton in 1924 and was identified as ‘Venda?’.

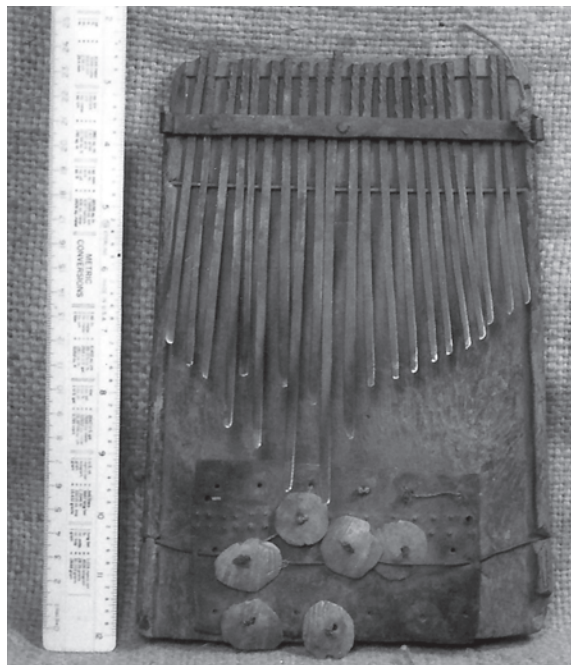


Figure 1. Instrument ET 6981 in the Ditsong Cultural History Museum, Pretoria.

I immediately thought, this must be an early, or original, *hera* forerunner such as I had proposed at the top of page 93 in the 1972 article. It had light, thin, sensitive keys, and remarkably it was nearly perfectly in tune; only the two outer keys on the left were out of tune. In other respects its construction, especially the hollow, bell-shaped body with fluted sides and the flat pressure bar held down with rivets, it closely resembled the 'old Sena *nyonganyonga*' illustrated on page 97 of that article. Its Left hand (L) low notes were all tuned so that their first overtone was in unison with the Right hand (R) notes, which are nominally two octaves higher. The fundamentals of all but two of the L low notes were well over two octaves below their overtone, so they would have produced a deep bass rumble at indefinite pitch.

Figure 2 shows the pitch layout of the keys of the ET 6981 instrument, and those of the typical modern *hera* and *nyonganyonga*. Each circle represents a key and the pitch it plays on each instrument. The diagrams do not describe the exact pitches of the notes. They are designed to show the layouts in terms of their own scale system, in this case a heptatonic scale typical of the lower Zambezi region and the wide highlands to the south. The black pitches show a key feature of the family resemblance of these mbiras – that being the non-scalar order of the pitch layout. Notes shown on the same line are at the same pitch; two notes numbered for instance 1 and 1' are an octave apart, etc. The diagrams also manage at the same time to convey a good idea of the position of the tips of the keys, because the length of an mbira key is the main determinant of its pitch.

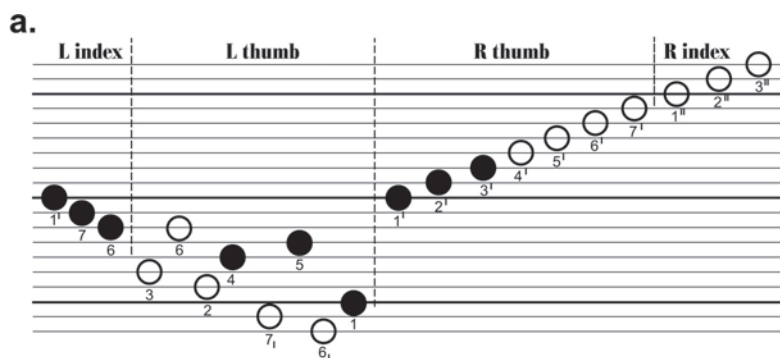
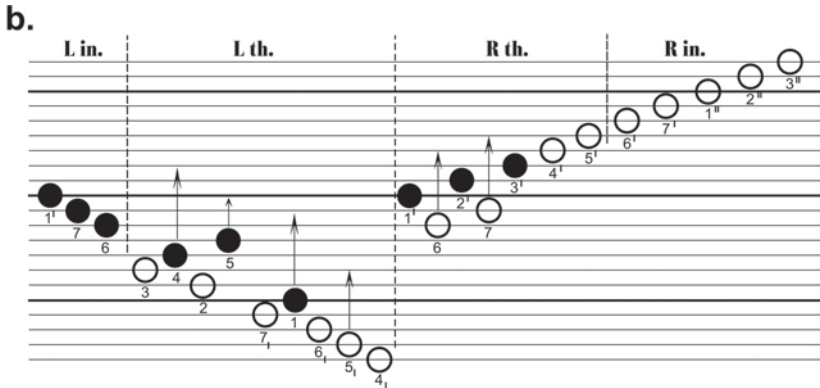
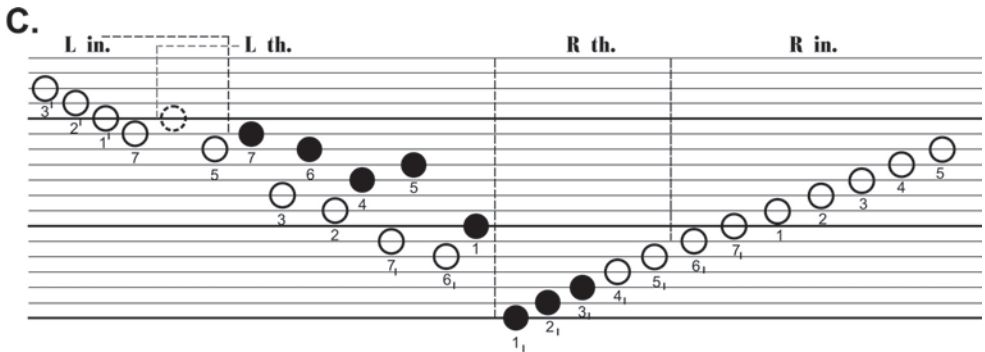


Figure 2a. Note layout of ET 6981.

The unique irregular layout of the L thumb keys, and the straight-up scale in the R hand put ET 6981 firmly into the *hera/nyonganyonga* family. But it is not precisely the same as either of them. It is closer to *nyonganyonga* in the note arrangement and construction, but it has two significant characteristics that move it towards *hera*: 1) The whole R side is now higher than the L side as in the *hera*, i.e. raised by two octaves (this was foreshadowed in Dzingo's malimba described on pages 96-7); 2) The three L index notes have established themselves as pitches 1' 7 6, in the *hera* style, sharing Note 1' with the R hand.

Figure 2b. Note layout of *hera/matepe*.Figure 2c. Note layout of *nyonganyonga*.

Note that the appearance of the modern *hera* has changed with the addition of extra notes in three areas – at the low end of the L hand and at both ends of the R hand. The resemblance with the *nyonganyonga* can easily be seen, however, by comparing the layouts. Other changes are 1) the omission of up to three duplicated *nyonganyonga* notes in the area where the L index and thumb notes meet, which simplifies this part of the layout and removes what looks like an early historical or developmental inconsistency inherent in the *nyonganyonga*; 2) The four low notes 3, 2, 7, 6 are shifted across one place to the right in the *hera*; this has no practical effect on the way it is played.

Nyonganyonga layout is relatively consistent over a wide geographic area. But the *hera* shows many variations in note layout, all of which contain the distinctive *nyonganyonga* plan. However, none of the *hera* variations appear in any *nyonganyonga* layout among the many examples of the instrument I have seen. From this evidence I now conclude that the *nyonganyonga* must be the progenitor of the *hera*, necessitating some redrawing of the ‘Family of the kalimba’ diagram that appears on page 89 of the 1972 article, as seen in Figure 3.

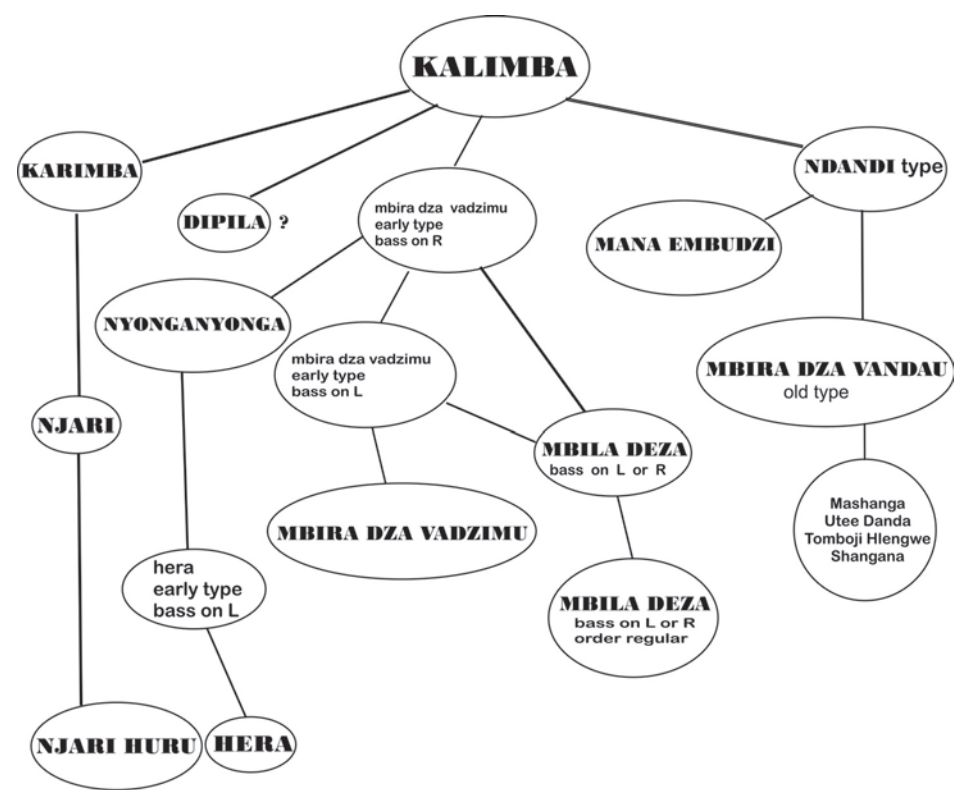


Figure 3. Family of the Kalimba, with changes in the *nyonganyonga* line.
(Revised from the original in Tracey 1972).

References

Tracey, Andrew
1972 "The Original African Mbira." *African Music* 5(2): 85–104.